

Special Feature

Life and Work of Korean War Widows during the 1950s

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Introduction

The Korean War (1950-1953) left a vast population of war widows (*jeonjaeng mimang-in*) in its wake. Beyond their sheer numbers, what is significant about the Korean War widows is the fact that these women began to venture outside the domestic sphere, looking for a new life. Before the Korean War, aside from agricultural labor, it was not common for a woman to have a job outside the home. The war provided an important impetus for women to engage in economic activities in the public arena.

The employment rate for women before the war, which includes those engaged in agriculture, was below 30% in 1949. During the war, in 1951 and 1952, however, the rate skyrocketed to around 60%. Although the figures substantially declined after the war, some 35% of the total adult female population continued to be gainfully employed. That means women accounted for almost half—around 46%—of the total economically active population in South Korea until the end of the 1950s.¹

Most war widows had to work in order to support the family in place of their deceased husbands. According to government statistics, the total number of war widows during the postwar 1950s was approximately half a million. Among them, about 150,000 women were unemployed and the remaining 350,000 appear to have been engaged in economic activity, indicating that around 70% of war widows became part of the workforce.

In Korea, women's roles were largely confined to the domestic sphere prior to the 1950s. Most married women spent their lives rearing children and supporting their husband's family. The war, however, affected individual life and consciousness as well as the larger structure and value systems of the state and society. The Korean War widows, who once had accepted the traditional roles of wife and daughter-in-law, now ventured out into the larger society as economic heads of their families, whether willingly or not.

Female participation in economic activities, regardless of how it came about, grew prevalent in postwar South Korea. Along with this new social development, it is also evident that various social discourses, ranging from negative to positive views of women's economic activities, emerged and circulated. As will be discussed later in detail, during this era it is possible to discover radical and liberating discourses on women in newspapers and journals that, at least at the level of discourse, are not antiquated, even compared to today's feminist discussions.

This essay seeks to grasp Korean society's general perception of women's economic activities and understand actual patterns of such experiences, focusing on

1. The statistics are from *Chōsen Ginkō* (Joseon Eunhaeng) and the South Korean Ministry of Home Affairs, as listed in Yi Imha (2004):90-93.

the 1950s. Primary sources used for this research are newspapers, including *Dong-a Ilbo* and *Chosun Ilbo*, and journals printed during the 1950s, such as *Yeowon*, *Jubusaeenghwal*, and *Saesallim*. I analyze the characteristics and contents of relevant discourse contained in these sources, focusing on articles that discuss women's employment in particular. In tracing actual patterns of women's experiences in the workplace, I focused on the Korean War widows, a subgroup of victims the war produced en masse, because they played a significant role in the overall increase of female participation in economic activities during the period. Having lost their husbands in the war, many of them were forced into the workforce to support their families. As discussed above, among the approximately half a million Korean War widows, 350,000 worked continuously during the 1950s.² Focusing on the life course of war widows, this essay seeks to understand, particularly through experiences at work, how the women adapted to the much changed and shifting realities of postwar South Korea.

The following table summarizes basic personal information of the war widows interviewed by the author:

Table 1. Personal data of war widows³

Name (assumed)	Birth place, province	Birth year	Children	Education	Co-habitants	Husband's prewar occupation
Gang Seonmi	Ongjin, Hwanghae-do	1931	1 daughter	uneducated	granddaughter	student
Yi Sasun	Daegu, Gyeongsangbuk-do	1933	1 son	uneducated	single	teaching assistant (jogyo)
Hwang Bunnam	Andong, Gyeongsangbuk-do	1927	1 daughter	primary school	single	civil servant (county office)
Yi Gyeahui	Guseong, Gyeongsangbuk-do	1932	1 son	uneducated	son's family	commerce
Jang Gyeongmun	Gimcheon, Gyeongsangbuk-do	1934	1 Son	primary school	single	policeman
Bak Jeongjae	Seoul	1926	2 sons, 1 daughter	uneducated	son's family	civil servant (central government)
Yi Byeong-chun	Seoul	1931	1 son	primary school	son's family	military personnel
Kim Boseon	Gurye, Jeollanam-do	1932	1 son, 1 daughter	uneducated	single	youth group member
Kim Yeongja	Seocheon, Chungcheongnam-do	1927	1 son	uneducated	son's family	farmer

2. The statistics come from the South Korean Ministry of Health and Welfare, as listed in Yi Imha, 2004: 35.

3. The interview materials used in this paper are from the author's own interviews with war widows conducted from December 2007 to June 2008 at the Association of the Bereaved Spouses of Military and Police Personnel (Jeonmol gun-gyeong mimang-inhoe) offices in Seoul and Gyeonggi Province.

To be precise, the interviewees are officially referred to as “the bereaved spouses of military and police personnel.” Their husbands died while serving in the Korean War, and are recognized as such by the South Korean government. The Association of the Bereaved Spouses of Military and Police Personnel (*Jeonmol gun-gyeong mimang-inhoe*) is the officially recognized association of war widows, organized nationally under the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs in South Korea. Most widows interviewed were born around the year 1930 and they are now roughly in their late 70s or early 80s. They live in Seoul and parts of the Gyeonggi Province.

Social Perceptions of Economically Active Women

Writings on women engaged in economic activities in 1950s journals cover the full spectrum of opinion. Perspectives vary widely, from overwhelmingly positive appraisals of the trend of women joining the workforce to negative and critical stances that relegate women to the domestic sphere. Roughly speaking, we can divide the journal articles on working women during the 1950s into two broadly defined groups, one that promotes generally positive viewpoints and the other that endorses largely negative perspectives. The two groups can be further divided into several subgroups.

1. Positive Perceptions

1) “Working Women” as a Natural Development of the Times⁴

In the contemporary media we can discern a strain of views that recognized women’s advancing into work outside the home as something positive and natural. According to this view, the trend of women going out into the world and earning money, although prompted by a war initially, should not be regarded as a temporary or unnatural development. Rather, the general tendency was to speak of the changing social atmosphere as a natural and positive drift of the times. We often find multifaceted and analytical articles that critically engaged the prevailing perceptions on labor and the family system, or, taking a step further, argued for

4. “Working women” (*Jigoep yeoseong*) was a term generally used by newspapers (*Chosun Ilbo*, *Dong-a Ilbo*) and journals (*Jubu saenghwal*, *Yeowon*, *Saesallim*) in the 1950s to refer to women who had a job and engaged in economic activities outside the domestic sphere. This term, however, is no longer in general usage today. In this essay, therefore, it will be used as a term that reflects a particular historic usage.

Picture 1. Women of Seoul. *Yeowon*, June 1956.



active meanings of work for women in the context of women's rights and liberation. What is noteworthy here is the fact that contemporary newspaper and journal articles put forth an analysis that was quite different from the conventional view that emphasized the unavoidable sacrifices of bereaved women. In other words, instead of imagining the widows as passive figures in need of protection in a society devastated by war, this group of journal and newspaper articles emphasized the need for women themselves to use their entry into outside work as an opportunity to acquire a new consciousness as "masters" of their lives and actively carry out their "own liberation." Underneath such argument there seems to have been a new set of values emerging, which emphasized the principle of gender equality. For example, a *Chosun Ilbo* article claimed that women should be respected as "full-fledged independent individuals" ("Sae minbeop-gwa yeoseong-ui jiwi," *Chosun Ilbo*, November 29, 1959).

In today's environment, arguments for gender equality certainly do not sound radical; if anything, they are regarded as a cliché. However, it is worth noting that it was not until the late 1950s that South Korea legally confirmed women's status as independent individuals not dependent upon men.⁵ Therefore, in the 1950s,

5. The new civil laws enacted at the end of 1959 show significant changes in terms of women's legal standing. Major changes include the affirmation of a woman's ability to carry out legal actions without their husband's prior permission and to get involved in property management as equals. ("14-nyeon-gwa

gaining economic power and means of livelihood for women was in fact not simply a matter related to a family's financial state or the changing industrial structure. It was an issue bound to raise fundamental, ontological questions regarding women's rights as equal "human beings." The passage quoted below shows how labor was viewed as a means to achieve the autonomy and humanity of women.

As human beings, women also have a duty to work. We also believe that they are born with the capacity and skills to carry out their respective duties. In other words, as human beings equal to men, women are to be recognized by God, by society, and by individuals as having their own individuality in life. (Kim Jihyang, "Jigoep yeoseong-gwa mi: Geudeul-eul wihan angketeu," *Chosun Ilbo*, July 31, 1958)

Moving beyond the line of argument that women's increasing economic activities represent a natural and positive social development, there were also discussions that upheld the increased economic activities of women from the perspective of women's own individual happiness and rights.

2) Women's Work as the Humane "Pursuit of Happiness" and "Rights"

As the laws came to defend gender equality, arguments for women's participation in economic activities as a right and as a means to achieve meaningful gender equality also appeared. According to these lines of reasoning, independent economic life was a prerequisite for women to achieve their own "happiness." In other words, the second type of positive arguments for women working outside the home presented women's equal participation in work as a necessary and sufficient condition for their happiness.

The statement below suggests that the conventional "aristocratic bias" against labor, which both men and women possess, should be overcome, and argues that a woman who is working could fulfill her duty as a "member of society" better than the housewives who confine themselves to the domestic sphere.

Labor is one of the proud basic rights of all people, and there is no reason for

yeoseong haebang: jasik naajuneun deseo beoseonada," *Donga ilbo*, August 15, 1959). In other words, before the new civil laws, women were in all practical purposes legal incompetents. Many newspapers called it women's "liberation" and "recognition as independent characters." ("Saeminbeop-gwa yeoseong-ui jiji," *Chosun Ilbo*, November 29, 1959).

married women to be hesitant in exercising their rights, as they are also human beings.... Married women should not only be able to work according to their abilities, but working is also a duty that they have as members of society. (Kim Huisu, "Geunro-eseodo namnyeo dongdeunggwon-eul chatja," *Yeowon*, January 1959)

It is obvious that for both men and women, happiness, as a category not easily quantified or standardized, tends to be a subjective and psychological matter. It is therefore difficult to judge and analyze the arguments that speak of happiness. As the next quotation shows, one cannot simply claim that all women with careers are necessarily happier than housewives. Despite these limitations, however, the significance of such discourse found in 1950s journals is that they refuted traditional values that naturalized women's role in the family and positively and actively presented new ways of life through which a woman could contribute to society and discover her own rights and happiness as an individual, not as one who simply lives to serve her family members.

If a woman who is both a mother and a wife also has her own "job," it will be an inconvenience in her life compared to the cases of women without jobs.... For a woman who has her own specialized field, however, conditions are there for her to inevitably have that [job].... She is happy when she follows it [her career] and unhappy when she is deprived of it. Therefore, we can say that a woman who has a job is a very happy person. (Gang Sinjae, "Yeoseong jasin-ui il-gwa haengbok." *Dong-a Ilbo*, October 15, 1955)

3) Women's Labor as a Foundation for Social Reconstruction

Lastly, we also find the arguments that emphasize women's social activities in the context of the need for an overall reconstruction and revitalization of war-torn Korean society. Unlike the arguments analyzed above that situate women's economic activities in the context of women's individual rights and the pursuit of happiness, this set of arguments moves beyond the discussion of the individual search for happiness and improved status, and evaluates women's occupational activities in terms of their duties to, and roles in, society and the state. One author even portrays the life of a working woman who combines her household duties and work using the phrases "a symbol of happiness" and even "something sacred" (Yi Jongsu, "Jigeop yeoseong-gwa gajeong," *Saesallim*, September 1958). It is worth noting that, as the

quotation below indicates, in this perspective, labor was discussed not in terms of individual rights or economic advantages, but as the right and duty of a *gungmin* ([duty-bound] citizen).

I hope that each and every one of you will exercise your inalienable rights as a *gungmin* by utilizing your particular talents and will thus sincerely fulfill, through yourself, your duties as *gungmin*....Come to think of it, you and I are the ones who are to create a rich country, and the next generation of this country also needs to be raised by you and me. (Kim Sunhwa, "Hyeonchung-il-e jehayeo," *Saesallim*, June 1957)

A common criticism that penetrates the previous discussions on working women was that a disdain for labor was prevalent in Korean society. Fighting against such prevalent bias, the article excerpt below describes working women from the standpoint of the "healthy beauty of modern women" (*Dong-a Ilbo*, June 26, 1955).

Therefore, women's entry into jobs outside the home is an absolute necessity not just for the country but for the advancement and peace of the family.... If the sight of a woman preparing dinner for her husband after she comes home from work is not the symbol of happiness, then what is? Also, the sight of them working at various workplaces, starting with the textile industry, for their future as industrial warriors is indeed a sacred sight. (Yi Jongsu, "Jigeop yeoseong-gwa gajeong," *Sasallim*, September 1958)

The significance of the "spirit of labor" is emphasized in the above quotation, especially in that women's labor would contribute to the larger society as well as to the family's advancement. Some even spoke of women's jobs as the "epochal duty" (*sidae-ui immu*), not a matter of individual preference, elevating women's economic activities to the level of a national and societal calling (Bak Gillae, "Yeoseong-ui jiwi hyangsang," *Saesallim*, June 1957). Articles on particularly successful women at the workplace or those introducing potential occupations for women appear frequently in this period. Hairdressing and dressmaking techniques were particularly popular, and soon they became two of the most sought-after occupations for women.

Given the educational system and the economic conditions at the time, however, it was still difficult for women to receive adequate training for these

skills and become professionals.⁶ It is difficult to gauge how much the positive perceptions and encouragement reflected reality. As will be further discussed, a significant gap between the discourse and the realities is a prevalent trait of this era. On the one hand, radical discourse on gender equality and female labor was being produced and rapidly gained currency during this era. On the other hand, however, traditional consciousness, institutions, and industrial structure persisted.

2. Paternalistic Consciousness and Disdain for Labor: “How Incompetent Her Husband Must Be”

Even though 1950s journals, as we have seen, generally showed a propensity to “praise” working women in light of the trend at the time or as examples of modern personhood, dissenting views were present; although, compared to instances of praise, criticism of women’s participation in outside work appeared far less frequently.

The two quotations below both express their approval of working women, viewing work as the “duty” and “right” of women as members of society. They are quoted here because they introduce, in the beginning of their discussion, the negative perceptions widespread among ordinary people of the day.

Before the new civilization entered our country, [Koreans] believed that the best fortune was to not work but yet be fed comfortably, and parents also taught their children that living comfortably without performing labor was the right thing to do and the best thing in life. Such negative conventions are deeply rooted in society to this day, and it is not possible to hide the fact that many married women not only refuse to work outside of their homes but also hold a sense of disdain towards labor. (Yi Jongsu, “Jigeop yeoseong-gwa gajeong,” *Saesallim*, September 1958)

Many men think that it is a shame to receive economic assistance from their wives and that a husband’s prestige plummets if that happens....Even married women should engage in economic activities as their husbands do if there is a need and they themselves are capable. There is no reason to think

6. For example, because there was no hairdresser academy in Andong, a widow living in Andong had to go far away from home to Busan. She also had to overcome economic hardships and her family’s negative perceptions of her desired career.

that the husband's dignity will be affected by this. (Kim Huisu, "Geunro-eseodo namnyeo dongdeungwon-eul chatja," *Yeowon*, January 1959)

Such disdain toward labor sometimes colors the common argument that women's role should be found within the domestic sphere. Kim Sun-im, for example, argues "all women should recognize that the duty of a housewife is not to leave home and to fight against the trends that endanger the home and any theories that rock the happiness of the family." This view emphasizes the naturalness of the division of labor between women and men and the "misery of a home without a housewife" (Kim Sun-im, "Yeoseong eul gajeong e jeongchak silkyeora," *Yeowon*, March 1957). To take another example, a husband whose wife works confesses that he feels "a sense of shame resulting from an awareness that it is because I am incompetent." He expresses regret that, even though he has complaints, he cannot actively dissuade his wife. Nevertheless, he acutely feels his wife's absence at home ("Anae-ui jikjang saenghwal-eul bandae handa," *Yeowon*, November 1958).

In short, we observe that both positive and negative views coexisted regarding the new phenomenon of working women during the 1950s. It seems clear from the articles that the dominant trend at the time was to perceive women's economic activities as necessary for society and the country. If so, what were the actual patterns and experiences of female labor like? In exploring the issue, one must use extreme caution as the discourses produced during the period should be understood as discourses and not as exact reflections of reality. A gap certainly existed between the discourse and reality.

Patterns and Realities of Work for War Widows

Motives for entering the workforce for war widows during the 1950s fall within two main groups. Some engaged in economic activities for the sake of survival and livelihood, while others made the choice voluntarily. The patterns of work can be categorized as follows:

Despite their differences, both the "Survival" and "Voluntary" types are identical in that the widows experienced an expansion in their role in the family upon the death of their husbands. Let us now examine the realities of widows' work experiences while keeping an eye on the changes in widows' roles in their families resulting from their economic activities.

Table 2. Types of work taken up by war widows

Types	Motives	Types of work (real and aspired)	Examples
Survival	Family support: A. husband's family and own children B. husband's family → their own children	farming, street vending of vegetables and fruit, peddler selling fruit, clothes, goods from US military bases, maid, restaurant worker, factory laborer (polishing, rubber, metalwork)	A. Gang Seonmi, Kim Yeongja, Bak Jeongjae, Yi Sasun B. Kim Boseon, Yi Gyehoe, Jang Gyeongmun
Voluntary	Own desires	hair dresser, self-employed (in a linen shop), textile factory worker	Yi Byeongchun, Hwang Bunnam

1. Work for Survival: Becoming the “Economic Pillar” of the Family

1) Peddlers and Street Vendors

Survival was the most significant reason why widows' participation in economic activities increased exponentially following the Korean War. Widows worked as peddlers, street vendors, maids, and factory workers because they had to become breadwinners in the absence of their husbands. Most widows started working just to earn a living. Most widows' husbands had paying jobs before the war. With the deaths of the husbands, the widows were forced to make money to support the family. Many of them worked as peddlers and street vendors, having to take on work that they themselves did not need to do when their husbands were around.

In the cities, many widows supported their families by working at factories or venturing into unofficial realms of business: they started small peddling businesses and conducted businesses near the US military bases. Lacking capital and training, there was not much the widows could do aside from peddling.

I did a lot of work with my friends, including selling oil in Busan. I sold peaches, apples and vegetables. There is not a thing which I did not do. (Yi Sasun)

Yi Sasun began selling vegetables, oils, and fruit in Daegu while keeping her young son at her parents' home. On top of her original duty as a daughter-in-law to her husband's family, a widow had to assume this new role of breadwinner.

Picture 2. Life in Seoul: Struggle for Existence. *Saesallim*, September 1958



The aggravated burdens of widows are evident in the case of Yi Sasun, who had to send her young son away to her parents' home to be able to support her parents-in-law. Of course, even in the cases where the children stayed with them, widows nevertheless had to work to support themselves and their in-laws.

2) Factory Labor

The most common type of work widows were engaged in besides peddling was factory labor. Yi Gyehui, Bak Jeongjae, and Yi Byeongchun spoke of their experiences at the factories. The quotation below is an example of a factory labor experience.

[Because of a hemorrhage that continued for three months] I went to the hospital, and the doctor told me, "You have no disease. You will get better once you rest" ...I replied, "My son cannot go to school if I take time off from work. Then the doctor replied, "If you continue, you will end up dead" ...From that point on, whenever I heard of a place that promised a lot of

pay, I chased after it. That is how my son was able to complete his schooling.
(Yi Gye-hui)

Yi Gye-hui's is a case in which a widow supported her son all the way through college with brute labor, and without any help from the in-laws. The backdrop for the anecdote above was the 1960s, when her son was in high school. As one day's absence incurred a fine tantamount to the loss of two days' pay, she continued to work at the factory for three months even as her hemorrhaging continued. Bak Jeongjae, who worked at a rubber factory, shared an equally harrowing tale. When the interviewer asked her to recall "a sad moment" in her life, Bak imparted a story from the days when she worked at a rubber factory and her son was still young:

When I worked at the factory, my oldest son would come all the way up to the factory wall and cry there all day. He was four years old. Then the janitor would tell me, "Your son is here crying. Go outside and see him." When I went outside, my son would be asleep on the roadbed, exhausted from all his crying. That is how I lived in those days. (Bak Jeongjae)

Economic ties were usually cut when widows separated themselves from their in-laws (Yi Gye-hui, Jang Gyeongmun, Hwang Bunnam, Kim Boseon). Although loose relationships continued to be maintained to this day, there was not a case among the interviewees in which they received any kind of financial support after separation. Their life trajectories show that they worked most intensively during their twenties and thirties (1950s and 1960s) when they were burdened with the tasks of raising and educating their children. They tended to continue their economic activities in a looser fashion after that period.

3) Farm Labor

A significant number of widow interviewees took part in farm labor on the countryside. Although traditionally both women and men participated in farm work, labor intensity for widows naturally doubled to make up for the vacuum left behind by the men. With their husbands gone, widows had to carry out even those jobs that in the past were almost exclusively handled by men.

I did all of our work during the breaks. I went out at dawn to work. I would come in to eat when my father-in-law called me in saying, "come and eat,"

and I would immediately go back into the rice paddies. I would wake up from sleep in the early morning to do our work, then go out to do work for others. (Gang Seonmi)

Everyday life for widows living in the countryside consisted of family farm work and day laborer work for other farms in the neighborhood. The widows who engaged in farm work saw the hours and intensity of their labor significantly amplified. Most widows began working before the sunrise. They continued to work into the night, took a short nap, and began working again at the dawn (Jang Gyeongmun). Such experiences show extreme and irregular patterns of labor with little breaks, as any remaining time had to be spent on the household chores of preparing meals and taking care of the children. In Jang Gyeongmun's recollection, she was like a "servant" who produced children and worked for the family she lived with.

Being a daughter-in-law is being a servant, a servant who cooks and gives birth.... I worked all day even while I was pregnant. I would work and cook, cook and work.... One day I put my children into a room and locked the door before going off to work, because I worried they might come outside. I locked the door and went out to plant rice plants. (Jang Gyeongmun)

Most widows who lived at their husbands' family homes stayed on as a "worker" without much change after losing their husbands in the war. They sometimes did leave with their children, move to the cities, and form independent households. Although such moves may have relieved them from the responsibilities of caring for the in-laws, they nevertheless had to work hard to take care of themselves and their children.

As is widely known, an underlying cause in the overall increase in women's economic activity in the postwar era was the financial state war widows found themselves in after their husbands' deaths at war. Largely because they had to assume the position of the heads of household without much preparation, they had to either continue traditional farm labor in rural areas, despite the greatly increased labor intensity, or start small businesses of their own in urban areas. If we focus on the motives behind their decisions, it appears that their decisions were not made on their own will, as they had little choice to do otherwise because of the changes in the environment and in the roles they played in their respective families.

Even so, it may be overly deterministic to state that *all* widows became economically active in order to support their families. There were certainly cases of

widows who voluntarily chose to work. Although most of the time they did not succeed in maintaining a long-term career and setbacks and failures were common, their cases nevertheless differed from work for survival.

2. Voluntary Work: Aspirations and Frustrations

Another type of working widows are those who began working on their own volition. Although the widows of the first type remained at their in-law family homes after their husbands' deaths and did not question their duty to work for the family (Gang Seonmi, Yi Sasun, Bak Jeongja, Kim Yeongja), the examples listed below differ in several aspects.

I really wanted to run a hair salon.... But when I asked my parents-in-law to take care of my child for me, they refused. They said, "We can eat. Why do you need to learn that?" (...) That is why several days later in the early morning when they were sound asleep, I left for Busan with a bag in my hand. (Hwang Bunnam)

Contrary to most widows who accepted and adjusted to their new role as the

Picture 3. An advertisement of the Academy for Hairdressers. Yeowon (April 1956)



economic “pillar” of the family as their “destiny” and “fate” (Gang Seonmi), the case of Hwang Bunnam displays an opposite direction in life. It appears that Hwang Bunnam’s husband’s family in Andong was relatively well-to-do, and there was no need for Hwang to work to support them. However, her desire to become a working woman was felt by the interviewer more strongly than from any other widow. Although she sought to become a hair designer by attending a training academy after running away from home (even leaving her daughter behind), her stubborn father-in-law went as far as Busan to bring her back home. Hwang Bunnam’s desire to have a career of her own was obstructed once again when her daughter was in fourth grade.

There was a shopping center in Andong....I wanted to run a linen shop there....When I told my father that I wanted to run a store, he firmly said no because women working there would be wearing make-up and fine clothes. [My father] thought some guy would seduce his daughter then. In addition, he also said the in-laws would speak ill of him if I ran a store. (Hwang Bunnam)

Although Hwang Bunnam had a strong desire to pursue a career, her reasoning behind it was rather unclear. Her family’s reasons for opposition, however, were unambiguous and firm. When the interviewer asked Hwang Bunnam the reason why she wanted a job outside of home, she answered, “I don’t know why” and “I just wanted to do it.” On the other hand, it can be inferred that the members of her family had a traditional mindset to confine their women within the domestic sphere. An important reason why both Hwang’s parents and her in-laws argued against her acquiring a job outside home is that they believed having their daughter or daughter-in-law “go out to make money” would damage their own reputation and that of their family.

Opposition of her family, especially the enduring traditional values of her parents’ generation, played a critical role in obstructing Hwang Bunnam’s desire to have a career of her own. Although the specifics may differ, here is another case in which a widow sought to acquire a job of her own, even going so far as to run away from home. Yi Byeongchun recalls,

I had no money living in the countryside. So I went to Incheon to make money.... Although I left home to make money, I could not save up any.... So I went to Busan and worked at a textile factory for about three years....

One day, my father-in-law came to me with *gimbap* in hand.... My father-in-law asked me to leave with him and live together at home. When I told him that I would return home after spending more time working, letters began arriving continuously from home.

After her husband's death, Yi Byeongchun left her husband's family farm in Bucheon and went to cities such as Incheon and Busan. There she worked as a maid, a peddler, and a textile factory worker. When the interviewer asked about the reason she left home, she said, "I just wanted to make and spend some money on my own." By speaking of her dissatisfaction with the fact that she had no money to manage herself, it is clear why she left home. The types of occupations Yi Byeongchun held to become financially independent, being a peddler and a maid, are similar to the types of occupations other widows had. If we examine the context, however, her case differs in that her choice to work was voluntary and the survival of her family did not depend on it. However, even Yi Byeongchun put an end to her working life and went back home after her father-in-law and her family persuaded her to return.

Although active opposition by her husband's family also played an important role in obstructing Yi Byeongchun's dream of having her own career, there were nevertheless differences between Yi's case and the case of Hwang Bunnam. Yi Byeongchun's father-in-law did not appear to have used language such as "a woman should never do such and such..." or "the family's prestige is being tainted." The practical needs of having an elder daughter-in-law at home seem to have played a bigger role than paternalism in Yi's case. Differences are also evident in the ways family members pressured the widows. While Hwang Bunnam's family was coercive and unilateral, Yi Byeongchun's parents-in-law mainly used persuasion and pleading.

In the end, both women's dream of having their own careers was thwarted. Their cases, however, are significant in that both made their choices to work and have careers on their own and were not forced by circumstance.⁷ They themselves speak of the reasons behind their desires by making modest or hazy claims, such as "I don't know why" (Hwang Bunnam) or "because I wanted to make some money"

7. There are similarities between the two cases. First, they both completed primary school education. Among the interviewed widows, they and Jang Gyeongmun are the only ones who finished primary school. They were also from relatively well-to-do families; their parents worked for the government and ran a business. They are similar in the sense that their parents held "new occupations" and did not engage in farming. Such similarities stand in contrast to those from the *yangban* families (Gang Seonmi, Yi Sasun, Bak Jeongjae). Those from the *yangban* families got married without any education. However, it is difficult to generalize or discern any patterns using only these two cases, and further research is therefore necessary.

(Yi Byeongchun). Desire for economic independence or for acknowledgement of their individuality beyond their position in the family can nevertheless be felt in their answers. Although it is difficult to deny that the main drive for the increasing women's participation in economic activities during the 1950s was the harsh social conditions after the war, the two women's cases are good examples of how women chose to escape their assigned roles in the family and become economically independent.

Women's Work, Life, and Self-Perception: The Gap between Discourse and Reality

The interviews with war widows reveal a significant gap between the images of working women propagated by contemporary journals on the one hand, and the actual experiences throughout the 1950s on the other. In other words, from the experiences of war widows it is difficult to see how working enhanced the rights and standing of individual women, regardless of what journal articles may have argued. How can we explain the disparity between discourse and reality?

First and foremost, it is important to point out the entrenched sexual biases and discriminatory attitudes against women by men and the older generation at large. Biases against widows, in particular, served as direct limitations on women's pursuit of work life. Most widows conveyed stories of how they were mistreated, directly and indirectly, as if they were "a broken vessel." Widows were seen as being "easy" to approach sexually, as someone who "even Buddhist monks would stroke" (Jang Gyeongmun). They experienced harassment from village men (Gang Seonmi) or were chased after by married men asking them to run away together (Yi Gyehui). It is also noteworthy that the tendency to confine widows within the family emanates more strongly from within the family than from anywhere else.

The second factor is an enduring traditional status consciousness. What is important to understand on this point is that such status consciousness was strong not only in men and older generation people, but also often found among widows themselves, who were in their early twenties at the time. As Yi Sasun states, "Descendents of a *yangban* family do not remarry." Or, as Gang Seonmi put it, "Descendents of a *yangban* family do not remarry.... Even when they do not have children, they take care of their parents all their lives.... Children of *yangban* and children of *ssangnom* are different." Elements of traditional paternalistic ways of

thinking that women themselves internalized can be found in the above quotations. Most interviewed widows thought of their bereavement as a great misfortune, yet most accepted it as “fate” and continued their relationship with the in-laws. Although there were cases in which conflicts and dissatisfaction led to separation (Hwang Bunnam, Jang Gyeongmun, Kim Boseon), they all nevertheless continued their relationships with their in-law families in a looser form.

Whether they opted to form separate households or lived with their parents-in-law until they passed away, most widows became breadwinners. Yet it is difficult to detect signs that point to their enhanced standing or power within the family. If that is so, what significance does postwar widows’ labor have in their own lives? Related to this point, we notice that widows who fulfilled their obligatory roles often express deep “regret” as they look back their lives. Bak Jeongjae declared,

Who would live like that today? ... I lived like that because it was how things were in the past.... I remained subservient even when my mother-in-law came down with a stroke.... Thinking of it now, I wonder why I lived like that. It is so distressing...so distressing.

Kim Boseong stated that

Thinking of it now, I sometimes wonder why I had to live like that.... I don’t know why I didn’t try to get a husband and go live with him somewhere else.... I regret it, thinking about it now.

Although widows had to play an expanded and more burdensome role in the family and spent their entire lives working, it is not easy to extract a positive meaning from widows’ work lives in terms of living an independent and autonomous life for themselves. On the other hand, however, we can also find some symptoms that suggest that widows’ lives were not entirely consumed by self-sacrifice or submission to their families. There were instances in which a widow tried to build an active and independent life for herself, tearing herself away from a life of dependency. Illustrative cases of this are widows who pursued voluntary economic activities unrelated to livelihood. Although such efforts were eventually met with limited success, they are significant because they show that in some cases widows followed through their own desires to work and have a career, and expressed their frustration by departing from their deceased husband’s household.

Conclusion

The 1950s, during and after the Korean War, emerged as an important epoch in the history of Korean women's labor, in which a large numbers of women began economic activity outside home. The period saw active debate on women's labor, which was overall positive toward women's expanding role, especially in reconstruction projects in a war-devastated society, and in constructing modern womanhood through employment outside the home. The crux of radical social discourse of the era was a prescription that women should develop a new consciousness based on the idea that women are autonomous and independent human beings equal to men, and working outside home would be a concrete way of realizing that goal.

As we have seen through interviews, however, a clear gap is discernable between the discourse on women's labor and the actual experiences of women. Although the widows spent most of their lives as the economic "pillars" of their respective families, their lives did not amount to those of independent, "modern women," an ideal presented by discourse in contemporary journals. In most cases their labor, instead of turning into a tool for liberation, seems to have been used to compensate the missing economic contributions of their deceased husbands. Although most widows supported their families with the money earned from their labor in both rural and urban areas, they were still confined by their traditional role of daughter-in-law and carried out their traditional duties as such. Traces of enhanced standings or power in the family as a result of their new role as economic provider for the family are hard to find.

The reasons behind the gap between the discourse on female labor and the actual experiences are numerous, as we have seen. First, the particular characteristics of the subject group, war widows, must be considered. The "working women" in the pages of contemporary journals referred to the entire adult female population. War widows are obviously differentiated by the fact that they were married, had to provide for their married families without help from their husbands, and, in most cases, had little education or capital. In other words, war widows constituted the lowest stratum among the female population, which would certainly make their experiences differ from those of other working women. Secondly, widows in most cases began their economic activities outside the home for the family's survival, and in the end, they left their work when their initial motive disappeared. This shows that when work was understood as nothing more than a means of livelihood, it

could only have very limited meaning for working women themselves in 1950s Korea. Lastly, still-dominant traditional paternalism played a role in limiting the potential of women's work. Not only the older generations and men, but also women themselves tended to view women working outside home as an affront to the values associated with the sanctity of "*gamun*" (clan) and women's chastity. Therefore, even if some women sought to realize their potential through work, there was a clear limitation on the extent to which they could overcome the traditional, conservative values.

Despite these limitations, however, the cases of women who tried to experiment with, and carry out, their own desires to become working women against the stonewalling of the family are significant, even if their effort was eventually obstructed by their families. It is significant because we can see these women as displaying an archetype of "modern women." Although they narrate their motives in rather hazy or modest terms, such as "I don't know why" or "I just wanted to make some money," a certain aspiration to live life as an independent individual can nevertheless be detected in their statements, albeit in the form of little sparks that did not have a chance to catch fire. This is truly an essential part of the image of women at the time.

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Abstract

This paper examines the realities of life and work for women during the 1950s through life history interviews with Korean War widows. The 1950s was a time when many women began to enter the public arena in South Korea. This period witnessed, at the level of social discourse, radical discussions on women's economic activities in relation to the goal of women's liberation. What characterized the dominant discourse of the day was an activist thrust that defended women's entry into jobs outside the home as a natural outcome of the changed conditions of the era, as a matter of women's human rights, or as a prerequisite for the reconstruction of Korean society. On the other hand, however, the realities of war widows' lives in the 1950s show glaring discrepancies from what the discourse produced by contemporary journals portrayed. Most war widows spent their lives playing the role of family head, caring for children, and supporting their in-laws. It is hard to find signs of the changing status of widows in the family corresponding to their expanded economic responsibilities. Most war widows maintained their daughter-in-law roles while also assuming the role of breadwinner for the family.

In short, there was a gap between the image of modern women produced by intellectuals and the actual life stories of war widows. A major reason for this divergence is the fact that women began their economic activities to secure the livelihood of their families following their husbands' deaths. For war widows having a job often meant becoming even more bound up in the framework of traditional value systems and family institutions, rather than a process of achieving their own individual rights. In the cases of war widows who sought to work not for family reasons but of their own volition, we find that opposition from the family often thwarted their desires. Although ending in failure, the life courses of this latter group reveal much about how, during the 1950s, a radical and modern consciousness was forged while the traditional family system and pre-modern consciousness persisted.

Keywords: working women, war widows, oral history, women's economic activities in the 1950s